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SUBJECT: KOSOVO: CAMPAIGN OPENS FOR NOVEMBER 15 MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS

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SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED - PLEASE PROTECT ACCORDINGLY

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: The official campaign period for Kosovo November 15 municipal elections kicked off on October 15. The elections, the first since independence and the first managed by domestic institutions, mark an important milestone in Kosovo's democratic growth. Kosovo Albanian and Serb parties will contest 36 municipalities, including three new Ahtisaari-mandated Serb-majority municipalities. (Note: We will report on Kosovo Serb and decentralization developments septel. End Note) There is a general consensus that Kosovo's Central Election Commission (CEC) has, thus far, managed the technical aspects of the election well. We are providing political and financial support to the CEC, and we have stressed to political leaders that their conduct during the campaign will play a critical role in shaping the international and domestic assessment of the election. The Kosovo Albanian governing and opposition parties all have high hopes for their electoral prospects, but each will confront growing apathy among voters increasingly frustrated with the political class's inability to resolve issues, such as employment, that impact their day-to-day lives. END SUMMARY.

MUNICIPAL ELECTION CAMPAIGN OPENS

¶2. (SBU) The official campaign season for Kosovo's November 15 municipal elections kicked off on October 15. Seventy-four political parties and entities are competing in the upcoming elections -- more than 20 of them ethnic Serb -- for mayoralties and municipal assembly seats in 36 municipalities. These include the existing thirty-three municipalities, an expanded Novo Brdo, and three additional Ahtisaari-mandated Serb-majority municipalities: Gracanica, Klokoč, Ranilug. The two additional Ahtisaari-mandated Serb-majority municipalities -- Mitrovica North and Partesh -- will hold elections in Spring 2010. Voters will elect mayors directly, but municipal council seats will be assigned on a proportional basis. Voters will have the option of casting their assembly ballot for either a party list or a specific candidate.

TRAINING WHEELS OFF: KOSOVO RUNS ITS OWN ELECTIONS

¶ 13. (SBU) The November 15 municipal elections will be the first in an independent Kosovo and the first administered solely by Kosovo's Central Elections Commission (CEC). CEC officials see the elections as an opportunity to demonstrate their institution's capacity and Kosovo's democratic maturity. Nonetheless, the CEC has recognized its own limitations and reached out to the international community for technical support. The U.S. is providing \$3.3 million in assistance to help the CEC administer its Results and Counting Center, introduce an SMS system to more quickly relay election results, finance the CEC's public information campaign, and help train local journalists and NGOs on election observation. There is general consensus that, thus far, the CEC has ably managed the technical aspects of the election, an observation echoed by a National Democratic Institute (NDI) pre-election assessment released on October 15.

LET THE CAMPAIGN BEGIN - SOME EARLY CHALLENGES

¶ 14. (SBU) Though positive overall, the NDI report highlighted some important challenges for the CEC. Voter lists are derived from the Central Civil Registry and names have not been removed from the registry when people die or leave the country. This has raised some concerns about the possibility for fraud, something the Russian Ambassador (almost gleefully) stressed in an October 12 Contact Group meeting. The CEC plans a vigorous program against possible fraud on election day to address the issue. Many observers also believe that voter turnout will be an important measure of Kosovo's democratic progress, but if the number of registered voters is inaccurately inflated the percentage of voter turnout will be lower than was actually the case. As a consequence, our interlocutors

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have emphasized the importance of measuring voter turnout in absolute rather than percentage terms.

¶ 15. (SBU) In a test of CEC's patience and Kosovo's elections laws, some of Kosovo's most prominent parties, including the senior governing coalition partner the Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK) and the opposition Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK), began their campaigns several weeks prior to the official October 15 start date. PDK and AAK plastered Pristina -- Kosovo's capital and most populous city -- with campaign billboards and posters. PDK's junior ruling coalition partner the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) and ethnic Albanian businessman Behgjet Pacolli's Alliance for a New Kosovo (AKR) cried foul and formally submitted complaints to the CEC's Elections Complaints and Appeals Commission (ECAC). Whatever the ECAC decides, the actions of PDK and AAK were, as NDI noted, seen by many as "inconsistent with spirit of fair play."

PDK WORKS TO MAINTAIN HOLDINGS, LDK FIGHTS TO SURVIVE

¶ 16. (SBU) Governing coalition partners PDK and LDK are not running in pre-election coalition in the upcoming contest, and are in fact dueling for mayoral seats and control of municipal assemblies throughout Kosovo. PDK, which won pluralities in 27 municipal assemblies and 16 mayoral slots in the 2007 elections -- almost entirely at LDK's expense -- is seeking to hold, if not expand, its municipal powerbase. The once formidable LDK suffered huge municipal losses in 2007, winning only five assemblies and seven mayoral positions. LDK leaders are continuing to try to reinvigorate and reorganize the party, and hope that these municipal elections will provide the party a much-needed electoral shot in the arm. Nonetheless, internal fissures, including unhappiness among some with President Sejdiu's leadership, continue to hobble the party. LDK may have to console itself with holding its ground.

AAK: VORACIOUS FOR POWER

¶ 17. (SBU) AAK, Kosovo's small but prominent opposition party led by former Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj, has been singularly focused

on returning to power. A good showing on November 15 is seen as a potential launching pad by Haradinaj and the party for national elections, currently expected in 2011. AAK currently has three mayors and controls three municipal assemblies: Peja/Pec, Decan/Decane, and Gjakove/Djakovica. All are in western Kosovo. AAK hopes to solidify its western power base by picking up the vulnerable LDK-held municipality of Istog/Istok. The party also wants to demonstrate that it is more than a regional phenomenon by picking up mayoralties and municipal assembly seats elsewhere in the country. By all accounts, AAK is motivated and has organized local party leaders and its constituency toward this goal.

AKR and LDD SEEK TO GAIN LOCAL PRESENCE

¶8. (SBU) The Democratic League of Dardania (LDD) and the Alliance of a New Kosovo (AKR) best known for their enigmatic leaders, Nexhat Daci and Behjet Pacolli, leveraged their political celebrity to noteworthy success in Kosovo's Assembly elections in 2007, gaining over 20 seats altogether, but failed to win any municipal assemblies or mayoralties in that year's local elections. In the upcoming contest, the parties are loosely coordinating local efforts to gain seats in municipal assemblies. AKR continues to focus on national-level issues like foreign investment and gaining recognitions of Kosovo's independence, but the party is making modest efforts throughout Kosovo, particularly in Gjakove/Djakovica, where it is running a first-time candidate well-known in Kosovo's business community. LDD's campaign is less organized -- riddled by recent party defections -- but in a surprise move, LDD is the only ethnic Albanian political entity that registered for both the assembly and mayoral races in the new ethnic-Serb majority Gracanica municipality.

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BATTLING VOTER APATHY

¶9. (SBU) Whatever their electoral aspirations, all Kosovo's political parties confront the growing problem of voter apathy. Turnout, measured in absolute terms, has been declining steadily over the decade. The post-independence euphoria among Kosovo Albanians is also waning, and the voters we talk to express frustration with the political class's inability to make progress on issues of day-to-day concern to them, such as employment and energy. Political parties have been slow to develop issue-based campaigns that address voter concerns. Instead, their day-to-day discourse often centers on status issues, something we are encouraging them to change. That said, thus far, the major Kosovo Albanian parties have refrained from turning the municipal elections into a chest thumping contest over which party is the most patriotic.

COMMENT

¶10. (SBU) Kosovo's November 15 municipal elections are rightly seen as an important test in the country's democratic development. Whatever the outcome, we have stressed privately to the leaders of the country's major political parties that their conduct during the campaign will impact perceptions of Kosovo within the international community. On October 14, the Ambassador participated in a signing ceremony with party leaders of a campaign "code of conduct" to underscore the point publicly. We have also offered steadfast political and technical support to the CEC in order to help it resist political pressure, such as the August row over its sound decision against placing cameras in polling places. Finally, we are funding an international election monitoring effort and plan to send our own teams into the field in order to reinforce confidence in the electoral process among voters.

DELL